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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 007253

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [PINS](#) [PROP](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: TENS OF THOUSANDS GATHER TO LISTEN TO SONDHI DISH
DIRT ON PRIME MINISTER

REF: A. BANGKOK 5419

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 7213

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Alexander A. Arvizu for reasons
1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Defying a November 17 court order banning him from criticizing the PM, outspoken talk show host Sondhi Limthongkul continued with his weekly "mobile talk show" in Bangkok. The rally attracted an estimated 30-40,000 people. Sondhi detailed two heretofore new scandals, alleging that the Prime Minister's sister had used a government plane to transport friends to her housewarming party, and citing possibly inappropriate links between the Prime Minister and a millionaire Chinese businessman with dual nationality. The Government has so far taken no action to arrest Sondhi, although party spokespeople accused Sondhi of working with the opposition in order to try and topple the government. Despite government efforts to limit the broadcast of the speech, Sondhi's speech was available throughout the country via cable television and community radio. The mainstream media barely covered the event. With intimidation tactics not working on Sondhi, the RTG now has to decide whether to make an arrest, potentially leaving them with a political prisoner on their hands. The RTG may also be nervous to do anything which could potentially upset the King in advance of his December 5 birthday address. END SUMMARY

LARGEST ANTI-GOVERNMENT RALLY IN YEARS

[1](#)2. (U) Defying a November 17 court order banning him from criticizing the Prime Minister (Reftel B), outspoken talk show host Sondhi Limthongkul continued with his weekly "mobile talk show" in Bangkok's Lumpini Park. The crowd continued to swell throughout the two-hour-plus event; police estimate it attracted an estimated 30-40,000 people (NOTE: Sondhi's newspaper "The Manager" reported 50,000. END NOTE) making it one of Thailand's largest political rallies since Thaksin came to power. The assembled crowd was especially notable for its diversity; Thais of all ages and economic classes were well-represented in the audience. Poloff observed students in school uniforms, Muslim girls in headscarves, groups of elderly men and women, upscale young professionals as well as a large cadre of volunteers passing out literature and selling t-shirts and other paraphernalia. About 20% of those in the crowd were wearing yellow t-shirts emblazoned with the motto "We shall fight for The King" written in Thai. The indoor arena where Sondhi was speaking had a capacity of approximately 4000, with the rest of the crowd standing, sitting and squatting outside, watching and listening to Sondhi on a large number of outdoor screens which had been set up in advance by Sondhi's "Manager".

[1](#)3. (U) Sondhi began his show with a nod to the gag order, saying he was free to discuss any and all issues except those specifically mentioned by the court. He asked for the crowd's support for his efforts to have the order overturned in court the following week. He threatened to petition the Administrative Court against any ban on local cable television stations carrying his program saying "The Prime Minister keeps preaching about the creation of a knowledge-based society, but how can this kind of establishment come true if the people's rights to information have not been guaranteed?" Sondhi then played an old video-clip of Prime Minister Thaksin in which he promised to uphold the right of the Thai people to freedom of speech, eliciting hoots and applause from the audience.

TWO NEW SCANDALS SURFACE FOR THAKSIN

[1](#)4. (U) Much of Sondhi's speech focused on the exposure of two major scandals for the Thaksin Administration. First, Sondhi produced a copy of a Ministry of Defense document which he said proved that the PM's younger sister, businesswoman Montathip Kovitcharoenkul, had used a state-owned C-130 aircraft to transport her friends and relatives from Bangkok to Chiang Mai for a lavish housewarming party. The crowd cheered wildly as Sondhi cried out "Does everything in this nation belong to you and your family?!" Sondhi also detailed how the Governor of Chiang Mai had skipped four major meetings, including one on avian flu, in order to attend Montathip's gala. Sondhi alluded to an incident in 1973 when it was revealed that senior army officers had used an army helicopter to go on a hunting trip with friends. (NOTE: This scandal is viewed as one of the catalysts that sparked the

1973 uprising in Thailand. END NOTE)

15. (U) The second allegation questioned the link between PM Thaksin and millionaire Chinese businessman Yan Bin (a.k.a. Yian Ping and Charnchai Rouyrungrueng). Sondhi explained that Chinese citizen Yan Bin had somehow acquired a Thai passport and claimed to be an adviser to the ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party on his business card. He further alleged that Yan Bin had made statements claiming to be the representative of TRT in China, leading Sondhi to question how this was possible when China was a one-party state. He also informed the crowd that the Consular Section of the Thai Embassy in Beijing had recently been moved to a building owned by Yan Bin under mysterious circumstances. After occupying the building rent-free for a year, the RTG was asked to pay an exorbitant amount in rent.

16. (U) Sondhi ended the show with an appeal to the Thai people to remain vigilant and to protect their constitutional rights to freedom of speech and freedom of the press. He asked Thai people to buy only "allied" newspapers, namely Matichon, Thai Post, Krungthep Thurakit and of course, Sondhi's own "The Manager". (NOTE: Thai Post, Matichon and The Manager have been sued by the RTG and its supporters within the past two years. END NOTE) To close the rally, Sondhi signed a petition in front of the crowd asking the Government to "return power to the King." This petition had been featured in an earlier edition of "The Manager" newspaper. The rally ended with a passionate rendition of both the Thai national anthem and the Thai royal anthem by the entire assembled crowd.

RTG ATTEMPTS DAMAGE CONTROL

17. (U) Representatives of the TRT party and the military hit back with harsh words, but have so far refrained from taking any retaliatory actions. Although Sondhi's website predicted the government would issue an arrest warrant "within days", Sondhi remains free. A spokesman for the Air Force admitted that the C-130 had been used by Ms. Montathip's friends but argued that the plane had been flying to Chiang Mai on a mail run and that it was normal practice for guests to be allowed on board. A TRT spokesman characterized the relationship between Thaksin and Yan Bin as a normal one, and noted that foreign advisers are often hired by governments for advice on dealing with bilateral relations.

18. (U) On November 20, a Thai Rak Thai spokesman alleged that Sondhi's actions were part of a plot to topple the democratically-elected Thaksin administration. He reasoned that Sondhi's November 17 meeting with the leader of the opposition Democrat Party, Abhisit Vejjajiva, coupled with his growing support from the political opposition proved that Sondhi's goal was to get rid of the TRT government. He also commented that "No one in this land is less loyal (to the monarchy) than Sondhi." Abhisit noted that his party did not consider itself to be allied with Sondhi as they had disagreements on a number of important issues. However, the Democrat Party supported Sondhi in his attempts to safeguard the right of all Thais to freedom of speech.

19. (SBU) On November 19, Supreme Commander General Ruengroj Mahasaranond warned that "Our patience is reaching its breaking point. We may take action if Sondhi does not cease his criticism by citing the monarchy." This thinly veiled threat has provoked strong negative reactions and some newspapers have raised concern that the Thai military might seek to involve itself in the growing controversy.

CITIZENS HEAR ABOUT SPEECH VIA WORD-OF-MOUTH AND THE WEB; GOVERNMENT PRESS COVERAGE SCANT

10. (C) Although the Government threatened to revoke the licenses of cable stations that continued to broadcast Sondhi's shows, a number of local cable operators (including stations in Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, Phuket and Hat Yai) defied the ban and broadcast the show via a link obtained from ASTV, a small satellite-cable channel which is owned by Sondhi. ASTV allowed stations to use the signal for free. Reports from Chiang Mai indicate that the central government intervened directly to try and prevent the speech from being broadcast. The speech could also be heard on the radio via recently re-opened community radio station 92.25 (Reftel A), and could be downloaded for free on the Internet. Sondhi's website contained information on how Thais could tune in to the speech.

11. (U) Coverage of the event in the country's mainstream media outlets, most of which are owned or controlled by the government, was conspicuous by its absence. What little coverage there was typically consisted of a few seconds of visuals followed by interviews with RTG spokespersons defending the actions of the Government against Sondhi's criticism.

12. (U) Sondhi spoke eloquently in a composed, conversational

tone throughout most of the speech. The rally was peaceful at all times and although there was a strong police presence in the park, Poloff did not observe any interference with Sondhi's rally. At one point, Sondhi and his co-hostess informed the crowd that they had received information that the government might attempt to shut off the electric power in the park, and urged them to remain calm. They noted that with the help of some of their "friends" they hoped that to be able to continue, which they did.

CENSORSHIP AND A "FIRECRACKER" IN CHIANG MAI

13. (C) A Chiang Mai-based reporter from "The Manager" newspaper notified Consulate staff on Friday afternoon that Chiang Mai's Payap University had given verbal permission to broadcast the speech there. A subsequent "request" from Chiang Mai Governor Suwant Tantipat reportedly caused the University president to cancel the event a few hours before it was scheduled to begin. The audience of about 200 people then moved to "The Manager"'s Chiang Mai office to watch the program. According to observers, a Thai intelligence officer was openly videotaping the gathering, leading some to feel uneasy and leave. At approximately 11 pm, after the speech, there was a small explosion in front of the newspaper's office. While police concluded the explosion was caused by firecrackers set off by teenagers in the waning days of the Loy Krathong festival, Banarot Bauklee, called it a threat to staff and similar to the handmade "bomb" that has exploded outside "The Manager"'s Bangkok headquarters on November 3.

14. (C) COMMENT. The Thai Government is clearly flummoxed. Sondhi's relentless anti-Thaksin campaign has caused the Government to lose face; he has not been cowed by the Government's endless lawsuits and intimidation tactics. Accusations of lese majeste are serious allegations in Thailand. While it is certain that the RTG would like nothing better than to throttle Sondhi, it risks a potentially serious backlash if it arrests him and makes him a political prisoner. There is also the matter of the King's birthday address, which will take place on December 5. With both Sondhi and the Government hurling insults at each other and condemning the other side for "speaking for the King", Thais of all stripes will be eager to see whether the King makes any reference to the ongoing political war of words. Although it seems highly unlikely that the King would side openly with one protagonist over the other, he may offer some additional political commentary.

BOYCE